

Fall 2000 Deer Hunting Season Expected to Be a "Mixed Bag"

Weather Impacts Forage, Herd Movements

by Paul Wertz

If only the Department of Fish and Game could add a "weather management branch" to its deer management program. Such a branch could provide spring and early summer rains to central coast and southern California zones to stimulate forage during the potential summer starvation period. For northern and eastern deer, the weather office could help with timely fall and winter storms - without severe cold or deadly snows - and do the same thing for migratory and north coast herds. Then, for hunters, the weather branch could arrange for cool, slightly wet conditions to kick off each deer zone hunting season.

There isn't a weather management branch, of course. So in spite of some favorable off-season weather patterns in most deer zones during the late 1990s, hunters have continued to run up against discouraging heat, choking dust and the quadruphonic sounds of leaves crackling under their boots as they search for deer during fall hunts. Well, here we go again. With the exception of some southland areas, most zones have been blessed with fair to generous precipitation to help forage growth. And most have a good carryover of bucks left behind by the poor hunting conditions of recent years. If weather cooperates, hunters this year have a good chance of elevating the statewide kill.

About 33,800 deer were killed in 1999, roughly the same estimate produced through DFG tag counts for the 1998 season. The past two season totals are about 5,000 below the 1997 statewide kill of 38,600. The numbers are a bit deceiving, however. The kill drop from 1997 to 1998 was blamed primarily on suffocating weather that stifled the hunting season in

the huge, central coast A zone, where the buck harvest fell by 5,000. In 1999, the A zone recovered 3,000 of its 5,000 loss, but the statewide kill total was unchanged. Due in part to unfavorable hunting conditions, most of northern California - especially the 10 large B and C zones - showed decreases in buck kill.

Thus, for the new millennium's first set of hunting seasons, buck kill could rise throughout the state, including the northern zones. In many areas, buck-to-doe ratios are providing reinforcement for the suggestion that the weather miseries of recent seasons have stashed a few extra bucks for this year's hunts. There is, however, a contemporary ceiling on the optimism, DFG biologists point out. The heydays of the 1950s and 1960s, when deer numbers seemed to have outgrown habitat, are more and more seen as an aberration brought on by early century logging and free fire that opened the forest floor to sunlight and a "megaton" production of forage.

Today, the drumbeat of deer habitat loss is resonating throughout western states, as it is in California. Change brought about by man's actions - especially in a state of 33 million people and counting - has even given rise to speculation among deer biologists that centuries-old migration habits of some deer herds may be changing because of fire-starved summer ranges thick with trees and vacation homes and woefully short on



Mule deer bucks in Modoc County. Photo by Terry Nelson, Outdoor California Photo Contest.

deer browse.

The long view, of course, is tomorrow's news. The present, in spite of all the concern about deer habitat trends, still has deer residing throughout California and hunters seeking the special enjoyment of trying to blend into the wilds of nature while pitting their limited human skills against the highly tuned defenses of deer. So, for the late summer and fall seasons of 2000, here is the DFG's view of what's in store for deer hunters by geographical area.

Northwestern California

In the deer assessment unit comprising the six B zones, hunters have the potential to realize improved success this year. As much as any place, a large part of the "big green" area promises to have additional bucks because of recent good winters and because the past two hunting seasons have been hot, dry and short on kill.

A little less enthusiasm exists for zones B3 and B5 than for the

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rest of the northwestern area because fire has not improved the habitat much in recent years. The remainder of the zones, however, are believed to have stable to improving deer numbers.

In response to updated data provided by the DFG, the Fish and Game Commission approved a one-week cut off the tail end of the B6 season in western Siskiyou County. Biologists said the ratio of bucks per 100 does has fallen into single digits in two of the past three years.

B6 had become one of the more popular hunting areas of northern California after fires in 1987 burned about 287,000 acres of brush and trees, causing a rich growth of new plant life and a boom in deer numbers. The habitat is again thick and losing value.

The Cascade and Northern Sierra Regions

To the east, the four C zones are on a generally improving slope, especially when considering the buck-doe ratio data. Hunting restrictions of recent years have helped with the ratios, although total deer numbers may not be appreciably higher.

As in the B zones, weather will play a major part in hunter success. A couple of recent fires also should help.

Continuing east, the deer assessment unit covering "mulie" zones X1 through X5b can best be described as a mixed bag. Some areas seem to be sporting noticeably higher buck ratios; others have not yet rebounded from the 1992-93 winter kill.

Regardless, the systemic degradation of deer habitat seems to be a stronger force in holding down total deer numbers than nature's inclination to effect a post-'93 deer production boom. The brightest part of the northeastern hunting season picture this year may be the consistent reports of survey biologists and wardens that there are

some large, stately bucks out there.

In the northeastern Sierra unit comprising zones X6a through X8, there is a clear contrast. The northern portion of the unit is rated as stable with signs of improvement. Not so for southern zones X7b and X8. Deer herds in both zones continue to suffer at the hands of human decisions. Fire suppression snuffs opportunity for summer range forage production while winter range housing developments – primarily in Nevada – displaces deer and eliminates deer food.

Back to the west, the Sierra slope zones D3 through D6 are described as "fairly stable" and highly weather-dependent. If the weather office can cook up some storms – as is the case in much of California – hunters will be taking home their share of venison. Deer are not viewed as abundant.

One change pending Fish and Game Commission approval could add some zest to the D3-D5 hunting experience this year. The DFG is proposing to offer a single "D" tag that would be good in all three of the zones as is the case with the generic "B" tag for the six northwestern B zones.

Northern Half of Zone A

Farther to the west, the deer assessment unit for the northern half of Zone A is described as a "core deer area" with recent low buck harvest levels and the potential for big improvements in deer kill this year. When it dampens up some, as one biologist said, "deer come out of the woodwork."

Many hunters sit patiently waiting for stormy weather and, if they get it, tend to hunt primarily toward the end of the season. Because wet weather was missing



1999 opening day of X7a. Photo by Gary Aluis.

during the past couple of seasons, buck carryover is expected to be higher.

Southern Central Coast

There is a little less enthusiasm for the southern central coast unit comprising the southern half of Zone A and D13. Drought has been a problem and if it continues, a downturn in deer numbers and kill is expected – perhaps more so in 2001.

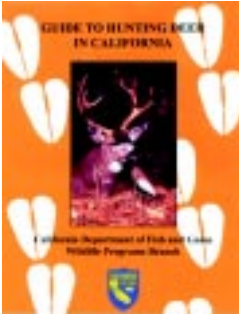
Unlike northeastern and eastern herds whose survival is most at risk during the cold winters, the south coast deer are at greatest risk during the summer, when food sources dry up. Drought conditions weaken fawn production, which takes its toll on deer kill a couple of years later.

A good acorn crop could save the day for the south coast deer – and for hunters – but without it, a down cycle is likely.

The Southern Sierra

Eastward again, the southern Sierra zones D7 through D10 are believed to be holding a good carryover of bucks from the non-storm period of the late 1990s. Populations are stable and buck-doe ratios are described as being high.

These four zones may serve up more bucks and better classes of



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Dueling Bucks...



These intertwined antlers were found in 1979 or early 1980 on the east side of Babbitt Peak in Sierra County. Babbitt Peak is south and east of the town of Loyalton (deer zone X-7a). The antlers are currently owned by Giulio Vanetti and were given to him by a logger who worked for a company which was helicopter logging on Babbitt Peak. A skid of logs was brought into a landing by a helicopter and the antlers were attached via the wire to the skid of logs. Tracks reader John Donnelly, who brought these to the attention of Tracks editor Lorna Bernard, surmises that the two bucks were doing battle when they became entwined in wire and met their demise. Photo by Robert Waldron.

bucks, according to surveys. Weather is a big factor in these zones, to no one's surprise. With a little dampness, the harvest could be very good.

Over the Sierra to zones X9a through X12, the forecast is that hunters may run into some exceptional bucks and overall higher buck-doe ratios. Ironically, last year saw hunters immobilized by opening weekend snow that made hunting very difficult. Thus, X9a-X12 may have a good buck carryover – but *because* of storms, not due to a lack of them.

As in most assessment units, overall deer numbers and fawn production are not very encouraging in the southeastern Sierra. It is one of the areas where biologists are concerned that an increasing number of resident deer may be

faring better than those trying to find a meal at the unburned higher elevation summer ranges.

Southern Desert Region

Due south in the desert zones D12 and D17, hunters face the byproduct of severe drought. Buck numbers have not improved and, more likely, have declined. Even meager storms can help grow some deer food, but such precipitation has been spotty of late.

The south deserts are considered marginal deer habitat for their special subspecies – the burro mule deer – and have become difficult to hunt because of reduced vehicle access under the Desert Protection Act. De facto deer refuges are the result, unless a hunter happens to own a camel.

South Coast

Swinging west again to the south coast zones D11, D14 through D16 and D19, hunters face a similar “droughty” condition. The opportunity to bag a buck is expected to be similar to the past couple of years, if not worse.

The good news is that the area has had some recent fires. But fires need to be followed by at least some precipitation to improve conditions for deer, and the storms haven't occurred. The bad news: herds are rated stable to declining, but can mount a comeback if rain arrives.

Paul Wertz is a public information officer with the Department's Region 1 office in Redding.